

19. PREDATION ON A SYMPATRIC SPECIES BY
HEMIDACTYLUS LESCHENAULTI (SAURIA: GEKKONIDAE)

The tree gecko *Hemidactylus leschenaulti* is sympatric with *H. frenatus* (the common house gecko in south India) in houses in urban and suburban areas. The former is the larger species averaging 166 mm in total length (snout-vent: 83 mm), the latter has a total length of 125 mm (snout-vent: 60 mm) (Smith 1935). Both species are territorial, predominantly nocturnal, feed primarily on insects and have identical hiding place preferences. The incident reported here occurred in a dimly lit room in my house in Madras city, South India. Hiding places for geckos in the 3 m square room are few and restricted mainly to the 1 m long gap behind the metal frame of the tubelight in the room. The gecko population in the room consisted of one adult pair of *H. leschenaulti*. *H. frenatus* although present in adjacent rooms was conspicuously absent, no doubt due to the presence of the larger tree gecko.

At 14.30 hours on 10th February, 1983 an adult *H. frenatus* (HF) (sex unknown) was seen moving away from the tubelight at a

distance of 1 metre. It was noticed also by one of the resident *H. leschenaulti* (HL)) from its hiding place behind the tubelight resulting in a short chase which ended about 2 metres from the light, with HL seizing HF violently at midbody, inflicting a deep wound. HF retaliated by seizing the side of HL's lower jaw. HL then released its grip on HF's midbody seizing the head instead, and, after a brief pause, commenced swallowing the faintly struggling HF. HL then returned to its hiding place. The entire sequence of events took approximately 4 minutes. It is suggested that HL is an aggressive predator and opportunistic feeder and that the gradual disappearance or decline in numbers of the smaller house geckos following the colonisation of an area by HL may be a result of predation (Whitaker, R. *pers. comm.* and personal observations). The food habits of *H. leschenaulti* is poorly documented and the only other published account of this gecko feeding on vertebrate prey is that of Sumithran (1982).

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